

Hearing on Sectarian Violence in Iraq and the Refugee Crisis: Testimony by Dr. Kenneth Katzman, Specialist in Middle East Affairs, Congressional Research Service

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Thank you for asking me to appear. I have been asked today to discuss primarily the effects of sectarian violence on religious freedom and human rights, with particular attention to the Shiite perspective and Shiite-on-Shiite violence in Baghdad and in southern Iraq.

I note with interest that the September 2007 Defense Department report on Iraqi stability, which was published yesterday, says that "The security environment in southern Iraq took a notable turn for the worse in August." This assessment clearly tracks with much of the press reporting out of the Shiite areas of Iraq over the past few months. It is clear that intra-Shiite tensions are increasing, and that Shiite inhabitants of Iraq can no longer, as they have for the past several years, take security "for granted." High levels of violence in Iraq are no longer confined to Sunni areas or to areas where Sunnis and Shiites live closely together.

It is likely that the drawdown of multi-national forces in southern Iraq is a contributing factor to the increased violence we are seeing. Britain has now reduced its force from 7,100 to about 5,200 in the Basra area, with plans to reduce to 5,000 by the end of the year. In August 2007, Britain abandoned its last base in the city itself, Basra palace, and is now concentrated at the local airport.

The various Shiite factions appear to be engaging in, or at the very least preparing for, an all-out scramble for power. Broadly drawn, the fighting is between what I call the "insurgent" Shiites typified by the Mahdi Army (Jaysh al-Mahdi, JAM) of Moqtada Al Sadr, and the "incumbent" Shiites of the dominant political parties in southern Iraq, particularly the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI). The "incumbent" Shiites have professional party organizations and well developed political structures. ISCI was well positioned after the fall of Saddam Hussein in April 2003, and it participated in the provincial elections of January 2005. The less well organized Sadr faction did not compete aggressively in all the Shiite provinces of the south, and found itself in the minority on almost all the provincial councils of southern Iraq.

In general, Sadr's lower class Shiite constituents want the benefits of the Iraqi state to accrue to them in the form of generous social welfare payments, subsidies, and government jobs. ISCI and its national ally, the Da'wa Party of Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki, tend to represent more affluent Shiites who want economic growth and free trade rather than government involvement in the economy.

The "incumbent" Shiite parties are generally closer to Grand Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani than are the "insurgent" Shiite parties. This is because Sistani is generally mainstream and from the "quietist" school of Shiite Islam rather than the "vocal" school. Sistani is revered as the leading theologian by followers of both ISCI and the Sadr faction, but the Sadrist believe that Sistani's quietism does not necessarily serve their interests because he tends to support the status quo.

ISCI controls a militia of an estimated 20,000 called the Badr Brigades, now renamed the Badr Organization. The Badr forces, thanks to the 2005-2006 tenure of ISCI senior official Bayan Jabr as Interior Minister, have essentially, by all accounts, taken over the Ministry of Interior and much of the police administrative apparatus. Badr loyalists dominate the 26,000 member National Police, which the congressionally-mandated "Jones Commission" on the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) said in September 2007 needs to be completely disbanded and reorganized because of its sectarianism.

This balance of forces explains some of the recent fighting seen in several southern cities. For example, there has been nearly continuous fighting between the JAM and the Badr-dominated Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) in the city of Diwaniyah (Qadisiyah Province) and Nassiriyah (Dhi Qar Province). In August 2007, the provincial governors of Qadisiyah and another Shiite southern province, Muthanna - both ISCI members - were assassinated within a week of each other. According to the Defense Department report cited previously, both governors had been "pushing back" against JAM "expansion and control."

An even starker example of the degree to which this infighting has spilled over into the public arena came on August 28, when fighting between the JAM and the ISF (purportedly mostly Badr fighters within the ISF) in the holy city of Karbala caused the death of more than 50 persons, mostly ISF and JAM fighters. However, the fighting interrupted a Shiite celebration (the birth of the 12th Imam) and many of the Shiite celebrants were ordered out of the city.

There are few Sunnis in southern Iraq and therefore Sunni - Shiite conflict is not a major feature in the south. However, Shiite militias in the south have retaliated for alleged Sunni atrocities elsewhere in Iraq. For example, in June 2007, militants blew up two Sunni mosques in Basra, apparently in retaliation for the June 13, 2007 destruction of two remaining minarets at the Askariya Shrine in Samarra, which is in a mostly Sunni province north of Baghdad. Such actions have, by many accounts, caused the few Sunnis that were in Basra to flee for central Iraq, including Baghdad, where more Sunnis are concentrated.

The city of Basra has complications even beyond those of Karbala, Diwaniyah, Nassiriyah, Amarah, and others. Basra is Iraq's main oil producing region and the point of export for about 80% of Iraq's total oil exports. In Basra, with power comes the ability to divert oil exports, smuggle them out, and pocket the proceeds. In Basra, there is yet another Shiite party that is competing for influence - the Fadilah, or Islamic Virtue, Party. Fadilah is led by Ayatollah Mohammad Yacoubi, who was an aide to Moqtada Al Sadr's father but then was pushed out of the Sadr movement when Moqtada moved to take it over after his father's death in 1999. At the national level, Fadilah and the Sadr trend are usually aligned against the "incumbent" Shiite parties because both Sadr and Fadilah represent lower class constituents. Both have recently pulled out of the broad "United Iraqi Alliance" that is dominated by the incumbent Shiite factions. However, in Basra, Sadr and Fadilah are competitors because of the vast assets up for grabs there. Fadilah has 12 of the 40 Basra province seats; ISCI controls 21 seats, leaving Sadr with very little representation on the provincial council. In April 2007, the Sadrists conducted protests in Basra to try to persuade the provincial governor, Mohammad Waili, who is a Fadilah member, to resign, a campaign that is continuing.

A Christian Science Monitor story of September 17 describes Basra as basically carved up among Shiite militias. The JAM is said to be very strong among the police force, and the Badr militia is said to have its loyalists heavily present in the Basra customs service that oversees trade between Iran and Iraq. Fadilah, which is very strong among the oil worker sector in Basra, controls the 15,000 person Facilities Protection Service (FPS) contingent that guards the oil infrastructure there. Another pro-Iranian militia is said to be operating in the city - Thar Allah, or God's Revenge, which grew out of a Shiite guerrilla group operating against Saddam Hussein from the marsh border areas.

The internecine fighting among Shiite factions does not appear to characterize the situation in Baghdad. According to the

September 2007 DoD "Measuring Stability" report, the Sadr faction-dominated district of Baghdad called "Sadr City" is "the most stable in terms of ethno-sectarian attacks." "However, this area continues to provide support for JAM operatives who use the area for planning, logistics, and other support activities and as a base from which to launch attacks on the International Zone and neighboring areas."

Effects of Militia Influence and Control. Numerous accounts from visitors to Iraq show how Iraqi social and political life has been affected by the strength of militias in the south. Some examples of the growing Islamization of Basra and surrounding areas are contained in the State Department's human rights country report on Iraq for 2006, released on March 6, 2007, as well as the International Religious Freedom Report for 2007, released just a few days ago. Similar information was presented in a June 2007 study by the International Crisis Group.¹ International Crisis Group. Where is Iraq Heading? Lessons from Basra. June 25, 2007. 1 According to the reports, professors at Basra University who were considered secular received written threats and demands to depart Basra. During 2006, a series of killings targeted professors in Basra (as well as Baghdad). The report also says there were "Serious reports of torture and killings leveled at [the Ministry of Interior's] Serious Crime Unit detention facility in Basra...." Basra's education director has required all females in the schools to cover their heads.

Although not limiting its discussion to Basra, the reports present trends in gender discrimination. In particular, according to the State Department human rights report:

in practice conservative societal standards impeded women's abilities to exercise their rights. Throughout the country, women reported increasing pressure to wear veils. Many reported the presence of flyers in their neighborhoods threatening women who refused. Women were targeted for undertaking normal activities, such as driving a car, talking on a cell phone, and wearing trousers, in an effort to force them to remain at home, wear veils, and adhere to a very conservative interpretation of Islam. In addition to societal pressures, there were several reports of women at government ministries being told to wear a veil or lose their job.

The International Crisis Group report asserts that the health care system has largely come under the control of Shiite Islamists, particularly the Sadrist, who controlled the national health ministry until the resignation of all Sadrist from the cabinet in April 2007. The Islamists have sought to segregate the health care system by gender, with doctors treating only patients of the same gender.

Although the State Department report does not specifically attribute such intimidation to Shiite parties or militias, press reports about Basra have consistently suggested that it is Shiite militiamen, particularly JAM members, that are conducting the intimidation discussed above. Other reports have said that Mahdi and Badr militiamen have beaten students publicly displaying affection and have attacked sellers of alcohol.

The Role of Iran. Most experts believe that Iran is backing many different Shiite factions, not knowing which might emerge on top and wanting influence with all. The one possible exception is Fadilah, which views itself as opposing Iranian influence in Iraq. U.S. military officials have asserted on a number of occasions that Iran is supplying the Shiite militias with sophisticated conventional weaponry, including Explosively Formed Projectiles (EFPs) that are capable of piercing U.S. armored vehicles. Iran's goal is to demonstrate U.S. weakness in Iraq and to ensure Shiite domination of post-Saddam Iraq. In Basra, according to the International Crisis Group report, Iranian intelligence has established a presence in Iran's consulate there, in humanitarian organizations, and in the pro-Iranian political party headquarters.

At the same time, Iran's influence might not be as strong or as organized as some assert. Basra governor Waili has not been forced out of office even though he belongs to Fadilah, which is the least sympathetic to Iran of the Shiite parties there. If Iran's influence were as determinative as some believe, it is reasonable to argue that Iran could, by now, have forced Waili out.